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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted using contemporary test scores to describe adults who reported that they had experienced severe reading problems in childhood and that such problems continued to influence their functioning as adults. Twelve men and one woman ranging in age from 20 to 54 volunteered for the study. All had attended college or technical school and six had doctorates of philosophy, medical degrees, or a combination of both. Background information on childhood reading problems of the subjects was obtained by self-report only. Although all subjects expressed concern about their present reading skills, the evidence indicated successful attainment in their careers, and the results of the contemporary tests were positive in all cases. The tests that were administered indicated no current deficits in intelligence, oral or silent reading, word attack skills, or spelling. (MKM)

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A STUDY OF ADULTS WHO EXPERIENCED CHILDHOOD READING PROBLEMS

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A STUDY OF ADULTS WHO EXPERIENCED CHILDHOOD READING PROBLEMS

Few studies have investigated contemporary reading skills of adults who report severe reading problems when they were children. Rawson identified children who had reading problems and followed them into adulthood (1968). Thompson, in his speculative article, discusses great men who achieved despite reported childhood problems with language skills (1971). A study of Einstein described his struggles in learning to read (Patten, 1973. None of the studies reviewed gave current empirical data on adults.

The present study used contemporary test scores to describe adults who by introspection felt that they had experienced severe reading problems in childhood and that such problems continued to influence their functioning as adults.

Procedures

Subjects. Twelve men and one woman ranging in age from twenty to fifty-four volunteered for the study. Six of the subjects had Ph.D's, M.D's, or a combination of both. They included several members of the medical school faculty and a pediatrician in private practice. Three of the subjects had received B.S. degrees. The remaining four had attended a college or technical school. Though all felt occupationally successful at present, they reported difficulties in acquiring reading skills during childhood. Most of them expressed feelings of inadequacies in their present reading and spelling skills. Several of the men had sons who had been identified as disabled readers when given an intensive diagnostic battery of tests (Larsen, et al., 1975).

Instruments

A battery of tests was administered to each of the thirteen participants at his/her convenience. Through individual interviews, case history material relevant to school, general health, and family background was gathered. Control of intelligence was informally accomplished both by the educational levels of the subjects and the administration of selected subtests of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (Wechsler, 1955). Subtests selected were Comprehension, Vocabulary, Block Design, and Picture Arrangement which gave a balance between Verbal and Performance I.Q.

Reading proficiency was measured by selected tests from the Diagnostic Reading Test Battery (Committee on Diagnostic Reading Tests, 1963). Included were the Survey Section, Form A, the Word Attack Test, Part 2, and the Oral Reading Paragraphs, Form A, No. 5. Oral reading was taped for more accurate analysis of the performance. The tests gave measures of reading rate, comprehension, error incidence in oral reading, sound discrimination, and syllabication skillls. The McGraw-Hill Basic Study Skills Spelling Test (Raygor, 1970) was administered also because many of the subjects expressed concern about their spelling at the present time during the preliminary interviews.

In addition to educational and psychological testing, special electrophysiological data were obtained. The cortical activity of each subject was monitored by scalp electrodes as he/she was visually stimulated by light. Certain characteristics of visually evoked responses (VER) had been found by Childers , et al (1970) to identify children who had "specific developmental dyslexia". The VERs were obtained as part of this study to determine whether these adults had wave forms similar to Childer's younger subjects.

Background of Subjects

A review of self-report data given by the thirteen subjects suggested that early school experiences had been quite similar in that each reported having a reading problem early in his/her school experience. Although the information on level of reading retardation could not be verified through past clinical or school records, the subjects tended to view their first three years in school as unsuccessful. Many remembered spelling difficulties and problems related to handedness. Several repeated first grade, received tutorial help, or both.

One person said,"I can still recall the frustration of trying to decipher the unintelligible symbols written on the blackboard which were supposed to tell me what I was supposed to do". Another, now a highly successful surgeon, said he struggled to understand meanings from marks called letters. When he realized others were gaining information through reading that he could not, he compensated by over-emphasizing listening skills. His auditory modality became highly effective as he improved his memory for the spoken word and acquired knowledge in other ways than through reading. His recreation interests centered around activities involving tactile skills. Gradually his reading improved during the high school years with special help. He became proficient enough to complete college and medical school which required the utilization of highly developed reading skills.

Another subject, born in 1919, attended the Philadelphia public schools from kindergarten through high school. According to his report, he had memorized some words by the time he entered elementary school but did not learn to spell until the eighth grade. Although he was initially left-handed, he was taught to write with his right hand and is ambidextrous at the present time. His early difficulties with directionality continue to be a problem, especially in map reading, occational reversal of letters, and in the interpretation of pictures.

Of his five children, one daughter seems to have many of his problems. At 23 years of age, she reads slowly, spells poorly, has difficulty telling time, and is left handed. In spite of this subject's early and present problems related to reading, he is a successful physician in private practice

One of the subjects, born in 1941, reported difficulty in remembering facts all through his school years. Special problems were associated with English, Spelling, and History. At present, he manages a form successfully. He feels he is a slow reader and does not read for pleasure although he does read the newspapers and short magazine articles. He thinks that his father and one sister probably had reading problems also.

All subjects expressed concerns about their present reading skills even though evidence indicated successful attainment in their careers. Some were uneasy when they had to read orally to colleagues during professional meetings and felt that this was somehow related to earlier reading problems.

Results

The results of the tests were positive in all cases. With the instruments that were used, no deficits were found in intelligence, oral or silent reading, word attack skills, or spelling. On the W.A.I.S. scaled scores, they ranged from average to superior on the Comprehension subtest (Raw score range: 11-19 with mean of 16), and average to superior on the Vocabulary subtest (Raw score range 11-19 with mean of 15) . On the Block Design and the Picture Arrangement performance subtests, they ranged from average to superior also.

All subjects read adequately when compared with the norms for adult readers in college. All were well within the average range and several were above average in rate and comprehension. (Univ. of Florida norms). In spite of reported difficulty in reading or speaking before groups, oral reading in the testing

situation was fluent with almost no errors. Spelling and syllabication scores were in the normal range also.

Results of the VER procedures were somewhat equivocal since amplitudes were smaller than expected and difficult to analyze. As far as could be determined, there were no unusual components in the visually evoked brain waves of the subjects.

Conclusions

Even though self-reports of the adults in this study indicated childhood and contemporary deficits in reading, no problems were indicated by the measures used. Perhaps early concepts related to the self as a reader during childhood might not have been consistent with actual progress in reading. However, the negative attitudes acquired during early school years continued to be influential during their adult years.

If these adults had been poor readers as children, all of them had overcome the problems. Self-report data suggested that intensive motivation and excellent instruction might have helped them complete coursework through auditory and tactile modalities until reading became better developed during their teen-age years. Adult professional goals did not seem to be severely limited by their early perceived negative experiences in learning to read.

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